

**STATEMENT OF  
GLENN POWERS  
DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD PROGRAMS  
NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS  
October 30, 2013**

Chairman Runyan, Ranking Member Titus, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to update you on several National Cemetery Administration (NCA) accomplishments since the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs last testified before you in April 2013. I also appreciate the opportunity to testify alongside Mr. Patrick K. Hallinan, Executive Director, Army National Military Cemeteries. Our partnership with the Department of the Army has resulted in the sharing of best practices and a strengthened commitment to serving our Nation's Veterans.

NCA employees focus on our organizational mission to provide quality burial and memorial benefits to those who served in uniform to defend our Nation and for their families. With the close of Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, NCA continued to address increasing workload requirements, expanded burial access for Veterans and their families, and achieved high levels of customer satisfaction. In FY 2013, over 124,000 interments were performed—a record number for NCA. We maintained 3.3 million occupied gravesites and 8,800 acres of land and awarded \$34 million in National Shrine contracts to repair gravesites. NCA issued over 654,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates and processed over 358,000 headstone and marker applications.

As we move into FY 2014 activities, there are several major initiatives critical to NCA's achieving its strategic goals. They include land acquisition and master planning efforts to meet the burial needs of our Nation's Veterans and Servicemembers; historic stewardship efforts to recognize Veteran service of all eras; continued commitment to

customer service and hiring Veterans, including homeless Veterans; and enhanced operational efficiencies. I will now review each of these initiatives in greater detail.

### **Meeting the Burial Needs of Veterans**

NCA continues to implement one of the largest expansions of the national cemetery system since the Civil War. Between 1992 and 2013, NCA dedicated 18 burial facilities. By the end of this decade, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) plans to open an additional 18 new burial facilities to provide access to a burial option for over 680,000 additional Veterans and enhanced service for over 2 million Veterans. The new facilities include five new national cemeteries and the realization of VA's Urban Initiative and Rural Initiative. This expansion, along with continued grant awards to states, territories, and tribal organizations, will allow NCA to meet its strategic target of providing 95 percent of Veterans with a burial option within 75 miles of their home.

This past fiscal year, NCA acquired land and awarded Master Plan/Design Development contracts for new national cemeteries at Central East Florida, Tallahassee, Florida, and Omaha, Nebraska areas. The 2014 President's Budget requests \$116 million to complete construction for these three cemeteries. These three facilities will serve approximately 350,000 Veterans and their eligible family members. We continued land searches for urban satellite cemeteries in Chicago, New York, and Indianapolis. We continue to perform due diligence activities for a rural cemetery in Yellowstone, Montana and land searches at five other rural locations. We awarded \$36 million in grants to states and tribal organizations for Veterans cemeteries.

In the next few months, we anticipate completing land acquisition for the new national cemeteries in the Southern Colorado and Western New York areas. Together, the five new national cemeteries will provide a burial option to over 550,000 currently unserved Veterans, in addition to their eligible family members.

To better meet the burial needs of Veterans, NCA began an initiative to establish new columbaria-only cemeteries in five urban locations where time and distance barriers to the existing national cemetery location have proven to be a challenge to burial and visitation. The Urban Initiative will alleviate time and distance challenges to

allow for a more convenient burial option for Veterans in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco/ Oakland/San Jose, Chicago, and Indianapolis.

To embrace the Department's priority to meet the unique needs of Veterans in rural areas, NCA launched the Rural Initiative to provide access for 136,000 Veterans who reside in sparsely populated areas where access to a national, state, or tribal Veterans cemetery is limited or does not exist within close driving distance. VA seeks to develop National Veterans Burial Grounds, which NCA will operate. National Veterans Burial Grounds will be established in eight states: Maine, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah.

The authority Congress gave VA to provide grants to states, territories, and tribal organizations has fostered a critical and valuable partnership. Grants are used to establish, expand, or improve state, territorial, and tribal Veteran cemeteries in areas that do not qualify for a national cemetery. Since 1978, VA has awarded more than \$500 million in such grants. Currently, there are 89 operational state and tribal Veteran cemeteries in 44 states, Guam and Saipan, with six more currently under construction. NCA looks forward to working with states, territories, and tribal organizations to share lessons learned from our new Urban Initiative and Rural initiative and to develop grant applications and award grants that reflect the needs, resources, and preferences of the local Veteran community.

### **Historic Stewardship Responsibilities**

To support our statutory mission, NCA maintains all cemeteries, both modern and historic, as "national shrines to our gallant dead" by emphasizing high standards of appearance and commitment to stewardship. One hundred fifteen national cemeteries are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 15 of which are designated as National Historic Landmarks (NHL) due to their national significance in American history and culture or their resource contribution to NHL districts. NCA's continued commitment to being caretakers of the Nation's history is reflected in our stewardship of the graves of Union and Confederate dead interred in more than 100 Civil War-era national cemeteries, Confederate Prisoner of War cemeteries and soldiers' lots. NCA

will install nearly 200 interpretive signs that will illuminate its Civil War heritage at 77 national cemeteries and 24 Confederate cemeteries and Union soldiers' lots.

At our historic cemeteries—just like at our modern facilities—NCA maintains high standards of appearance. In addition, we provide historic stewardship through the continuous restoration and preservation efforts of lodges, walls, and monuments. NCA initiated a partnership with the National Park Service to stabilize several superintendent lodges—some of the most historically and architecturally significant buildings maintained within the national cemetery system. In 2012, NCA conserved and replaced the country's oldest surviving Civil War memorial, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Indiana Infantry Monument, located at Cave Hill National Cemetery in Kentucky. Between 2009 and 2011, NCA digitized 60 historic burial ledgers from 36 of our oldest national cemeteries to preserve them for the future. NCA formally partnered with Ancestry.com to index the entries at no cost to the government so these digitized records are now electronically searchable by the public, Veterans' families, and researchers.

NCA provides historically accurate upright marble headstones to mark the graves of eligible Civil War Union and Confederate soldiers. NCA honors requests for replacements of historic headstones when inscriptions are worn to the point that they can no longer be read or if the headstone is otherwise damaged beyond repair. Recently, various individuals and historic groups expressed concern that the current definition of "applicant" for headstone and marker claims is too limiting. The current regulatory definition, effective on July 1, 2009, after a 60-day public comment period, reflects VA's obligation to ensure family members are included in the decision-making process because the death, burial, headstone, inscription, and gravesite location of a loved one is a very personal matter.

NCA has reviewed its existing regulations governing headstone and marker benefits and we drafted a proposed rulemaking that is currently under development within VA. In the VA Memorialization Benefits rule, we will propose amendments to address concerns about the restrictive applicant definition and create new regulatory provisions for the medallion benefit. Additionally, we revised existing claim forms for headstones, markers, and medallions, and have developed several other clarifying amendments, including a comprehensive definition section. We look forward to

receiving public comments when the proposed rule is published in the *Federal Register* under the requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act and the Office of Management and Budget.

### **Industry Leader in Customer Service and Hiring Veterans**

At NCA, we continually strive to sustain our extraordinary record of customer service and recognition of our best practices. NCA received the highest score of any participating entity—94 out of 100 possible—in the 2010 American Customer Satisfaction Index sponsored by the University of Michigan. This is the fourth consecutive time NCA received the top rating in the Nation. NCA was recognized by the Federal Consulting Group for a decade of superlative performance. We anticipate similarly high ratings when the 2013 results are released.

NCA continues to achieve high levels of client satisfaction as measured by our annual surveys of Veterans or their next-of-kin who recently selected a national cemetery for the interment of a loved one and the funeral directors who provided assistance at their time of need.

NCA's committed, Veteran-centric workforce is the main reason we are able to provide world-class customer service. Not only are we focused on serving Veterans, we continue to maintain our commitment to hiring Veterans. Currently, Veterans comprise over 74 percent of our workforce. Since 2009, we hired 459 returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. In addition, 84 percent of NCA contracts in FY 2013 were awarded to Veteran-Owned and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small businesses.

I am proud to report that NCA will soon graduate its first class of Veterans enrolled in NCA's Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program. This program, established in 2012, supports VA's strategic priority of ending Veteran homelessness by 2015. The apprenticeship is a one year paid employment training program for Veterans who are homeless or at risk for homelessness. In November 2013, Secretary Shinseki and I will present certificates of completion to 13 apprentices who successfully completed the 12 months of competency-based training. These new caretakers will help offset projected retirements in our workforce. Moving forward, an additional nine

national cemeteries were added to the program as sites for the 24 incoming apprentices projected for this year's Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program.

The curriculum for our Homeless Veterans Apprenticeship Program is based on the NCA Caretaker Training Program, which was developed to help achieve objectives in our strategic plan, to promote Veteran satisfaction with service and cemetery appearance and ensure a knowledgeable and responsive workforce. Roughly half of NCA's workforce has completed this course, and we believe it contributed to our continued ability to sustain improvements in appearance and customer satisfaction. Graduates have indicated a renewed commitment to their work and a reinforced understanding of our mission, vision, and standards.

### **Operational Efficiencies**

NCA places a high priority on environmental stewardship and managing its facilities in order to maximize resources and at the same time, convey the dignity required of national shrines. We believe it is possible to use resources efficiently and maintain our national cemeteries as national shrines. NCA is recognized by various groups as an industry leader in environmental conservation efforts at cemeteries. These efforts reflect NCA's commitment to conserving resources, achieving cost savings and providing a dignified burial environment.

Water-wise cemeteries, like those at Bakersfield, California, Phoenix, Arizona, and El Paso, Texas, employ water-wise and other grounds management practices to reduce water consumption. NCA worked with the communities in these areas to demonstrate how we can maintain cemeteries as national shrines while still reducing water use. NCA received the VA Sustainability Achievement Award for conservation projects at Riverside National Cemetery and Bakersfield National Cemetery and received the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality Award for water-wise management at Fort Bliss National Cemetery.

All new VA cemetery construction is "green," so our new cemeteries will start out being more efficient. Expansion and improvement projects at existing cemeteries also incorporate "green" standards. The recently completed renovation of the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery Administration Building achieved Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design (LEED) Silver equivalence in categories including sustainable site, water efficiency, construction waste management, and indoor environmental quality.

VA's use of pre-placed crypts is an excellent example of a practice that both increases efficiency and enhances cemetery appearance. Their use reduces the cemetery footprint thereby requiring less land, decreasing the cost to maintain and operate cemeteries, and improving cemetery appearance. Other innovative practices include the use of synthetic turf in certain areas where there are no burials. The use of memorial walls instead of memorial sections allows more grounds to be used for burials. In addition, undeveloped land is leased out so that there is some monetary return that can be used to improve cemetery appearance until it is needed for burials.

### **Concluding Summary**

We appreciate the Committee's support that has allowed us to make significant progress towards meeting our strategic goals. With your continued help, we will work diligently to expand access to burial options for our Veterans and their eligible family members, be responsive to our stakeholders and the Veteran community, and remain dedicated stewards of the rich history of sacrifice of those buried in our national cemeteries. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.